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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the extent to which content of business-related news stories was related (1) to the performance of the officials responsible for media relations, and (2) to the quality of the relationship between reporters and company officials. Eighty-nine stories pertaining to six businesses were selected from four newspapers and sent to the reporters and company officials responsible for each, along with a questionnaire. Company officials were asked questions concerning the accuracy and fairness of the stories, and both officials and reporters were asked questions concerning media relations. Results indicated that the perceptions of reporters and business officials concerning the source, message, and behavior of the source may be related to the ultimate content of news stories. The findings suggest that accuracy and fairness in a story cannot be viewed as the result of a reporter's work alone. Corporate officials must work for good coverage by developing their media relations skills and by striving to reconcile differing views, values, and perceptions between themselves and reporters. (FL)

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Public Relations Division

(Student division)

MEDIA RELATIONS AND THE CONTENT OF BUSINESS NEWS

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ABSTRACT

MEDIA RELATIONS AND THE CONTENT OF BUSINESS NEWS

To explore the relationship between media relations and news about corporations, four San Diego newspapers and six San Diego corporations were surveyed concerning 89 news stories. Respondents rated media relations and coorientational analysis was performed. Findings suggest that perceptions of media relations activities and certain coorientational concepts have a significant relationship with the number of errors in news stories and the overall treatment of the stories.

Paper based upon research for Master of Science in Mass Communications thesis (May 1983) at San Diego State University with the help of Dr. Glen M. Broom, Coordinator of Graduate Studies in Mass Communications.

Funding provided by the San Diego chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators and the Public Relations Research Endowment Fund of the San Diego State University Foundation.

MEDIA RELATIONS AND THE CONTENT OF BUSINESS NEWS

Media coverage of the activities of large corporations has received a great deal of attention over the last few years and has generated a bitter debate concerning the quality of business journalism.

Many corporate executives, dependent on public support and approval, have criticized reporters for inadequate and biased reporting. They often complain that their side of the story never receives the same prominence as does unfavorable news about their companies.

Reporters dispute the charge that they are biased and blame flaws in their coverage on corporate executives who refuse to cooperate with reporters or attempt to conceal damaging information. They also accuse public relations departments of being obstacles between them and the real newsmakers within the company hierarchy.

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which content of news about six San Diego corporations is related to the performance of the officials responsible for media relations and to the quality of the relationship existing between reporters of four daily newspapers and company officials.

The Media Relations Problem

Media relations is often discussed but seldom scientifically researched. The guidelines governing media relations were developed

over many years by practitioners who relied on trial and error, intuition and common sense to guide them.

Public relations scholars have articulated these guidelines with each emphasizing particular attributes. Cutlip and Center, in their book Effective Public Relations, isolate six rules to follow:

> Good relationships can best be achieved by the practice of a few basic principles: (1) shoot squarely, (2) give service, (3) don't beg or carp, (4) don't ask for kills, (5) don't flood the media, and (6) keep updated lists.[1]

Moore and Canfield offer a larger list of guidelines to follow in Public Relations Principles, Cases, and Problems:

> Frankness and honesty must be cardinal principles. Don't be evasive.
>
> Always be available to the press.
>
> Don't combine news releases and orders for advertising.
>
> Don't overplay the company or color the facts.
>
> Always assume that you will be quoted and be careful and accurate when making statements.
>
> Avoid "off the record" statements but, if necessary, clearly label them as "not for publication."
>
> Don't discriminate or play favorites with the press.
>
> Don't complain of minor misprints or errors.
>
> Don't mislead a reporter; if you can't talk, say so.
>
> Don't condemn the editor when a story is left out of the paper.
>
> Don't go over a reporter's head to his superior with a complaint.

Anticipate a newsman's interest and have facts ready in advance.

Be helpful with bad news as well as good.[2]

Lerbinger, in Big Business and the Mass Media, contributed a list of five rules to follow for good media relations: build mutual respect, recognize the values of the media differ from those of business, accept the risk of seeking publicity, have a sound attitude--based on your own competence and knowledge of the company, and be as open as possible.[3]

It is easy to deduce that practitioners believe their actions influence the content of news about their company or client. Implicit in this is the proposition that news content is not solely determined by the facts surrounding the news story. One plausible explanation is that reporters are unable to get all the information they need because of the actions or the inaction of public relations officials. Another is that reporters may be hostile toward corporations that refuse to cooperate or attempt to cover up unfavorable news from prying reporters.

In either case, several researchers have suggested subjective factors that may affect the communication process in a variety of contexts. When White first applied the term "gatekeeper" to mass communications, he asserted that the newsman's selection of news depends to a great extent on his own experiences, values and expectations.[4]

In 1971, Rogers and Bhomik pointed out the possible influence

of homophily versus heterophily as a determinate factor of communications behavior:

> Homophily refers to the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar with respect to certain attributes, such as beliefs, values, education, social status, etc. Heterophily is the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are different with respect to certain attributes.[5]

They explained that "In the process of communication both source and receiver behave according to their perception of each other and of the message being transmitted."[6]

Source-message orientation has been examined by several researchers but was best explained by Hoyt in Journalism Quarterly in 1976:

> Source-message orientation is an individual difference variable directly concerned with the components of the communication setting. It considers persons who are highly concerned with the source when receiving a persuasive communication to be source-oriented and those most concerned with the message as message-oriented.[7]

Coorientational measurement of relationships (used in this project) has been applied in several contexts to evaluate subjective influences on communication. Figure 1 shows the relationship among responses for the model adapted to the present study. Broom explained how this method is used to test the quality of the relationship in a public relations context:

Coorientational measurement of corporate-public understanding of an issue requires collecting data to answer four questions:

1. How does corporate management define the issue?

2. How does corporate management think Public A defines the issue?

3. How does Public A define the issue?

4. How does Public A think corporate management defines the issue?

The answers to these four questions are the four measures represented by the boxes.... As in the basic coorientation model, the consensus of understanding model includes three types of variables:

1. Mutual understanding represents the extent to which the corporate definition of the issue is similar to a public's definition of the same issue (agreement-disagreement on the definition of the issue).

2. Congruency represents the extent to which one group's definition of the issue is similar to their estimate of the other group's definition (perceived agreement-disagreement on the definition of the issue).

3. Accuracy represents the extent to which one group's estimate of the other's definition is similar to the other's actual definition of the issue.[8]

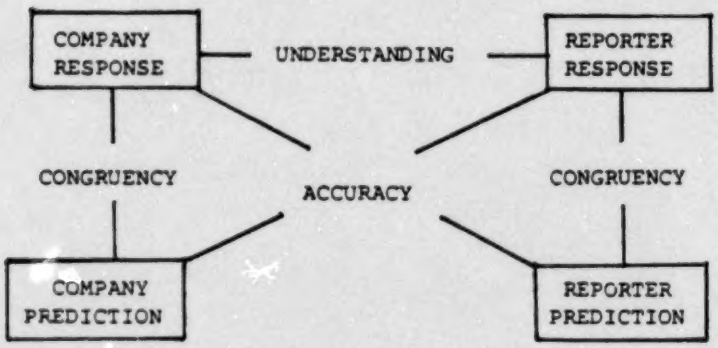

Figure 1. COORIENTATIONAL MODEL OF MEDIA RELATIONS

By isolating subjective factors that may affect communication behavior, coorientational measurement permits quantitative analysis of the underlying state of the relationship. From a public relations standpoint, locating weaknesses in the relationship can facilitate effective actions designed to improve communication with the press.

News Content

Media relations is important because of what results from it. Recognition of the power of the press has led business to become very concerned about its content. In "Business Must Explain Itself," Hobbing stated:

> No matter how good the corporation's performance may be in its appointed metier of producing goods and services, it is increasingly being judged by what it says or by what is said about it. Corporate words are becoming as important as corporate deeds--perhaps more so; and the corporation must learn to compete in the marketplace of ideas as well as in the marketplace of production.[9]

Many executives are convinced the news is often in error, and studies of newspaper accuracy don't refute this accusation.

Since 1936 when Charnley conducted the first study of newspaper accuracy, other researchers have strengthened his conclusion that about half of the simple factual news stories contain errors.[10] Charnley administered a questionnaire with news story attached to 591 randomly selected news sources and obtained an accuracy rate of 54 percent for the stories involved.

In 1965, Brown adapted Charnley's method in his study of 42 small town newspapers. The results, reported in Editor and Publisher,

showed that 59.5 percent of the stories were without errors. Questionnaires with stories attached were sent to 200 sources of news and asked for the following:

1. Indicate errors, if any, in details: names, addresses, dates, places, organizations, titles, etc.
2. Indicate any errors in other information, especially in remarks attributed to you or other persons (if you heard them) in quotation marks or by summary or paraphrase.
3. Is all essential information included? Do any omissions have the effect of falsifying or misrepresenting the news account?
4. Do you consider the article as a whole to be fairly and objectively written?
5. Is the headline a fair and true summary of the article?[11]

Berry conducted a similar study two years later (omitting, among others, business stories) and found that 43.6 percent of the 371 questionnaires returned reported no errors.[12]

Several other studies using a variety of techniques have produced similar findings.

The question remains: are the inaccuracies in business news related to the performance of company officials and to the quality of the relationship between them and reporters? Public relations theory would tell us yes--good media relations improves news content.

Methodology

Two approaches were used to evaluate media relations: (1) responses were used to create indices rating media relations, and (2) responses were compared to utilize coorientational measures of the relationship for each story.

From July 29 to August 26, 1982, eighty-nine business news stories were selected from four daily newspapers: San Diego Union, San Diego Tribune, San Diego Daily Transcript, and Los Angeles Times (San Diego County edition).

Stories were selected that pertained to one of six San Diego corporations: San Diego Gas and Electric Company, Pacific Southwest Airlines, Oak Corporation, Pacific Telephone, San Diego Federal Savings and Loan and National Steel and Shipbuilding Company.

Questionnaires with copies of news stories attached were delivered to the reporter and to the company official(s) responsible for each story. Of 178 questionnaires delivered to respondents, 141 were returned for a response rate of 79.2 percent. Fifty-nine matched sets of questionnaires were obtained for a response rate of 66.3 percent. Exact number of respondents is unknown because of the arrangement with some of the organizations to deliver the questionnaires to an editor or supervisor for internal distribution to the proper individuals.

Number of errors was determined by company officials' responses to the following:

> Indicate how many of each of the errors listed below were found in this story.
>
> Names wrong
> Dates wrong
> Figures wrong
> Misquotations
> Wrong emphasis of details
> Errors in meaning
> Misleading headlines
> Other errors

Treatment was determined by company officials' responses (on seven-point scales) to the following four questions:

1. Was the information reported in the story sufficient to explain the issue?
2. Did this story receive enough space to report the details?
3. Was the story as a whole reported fairly and objectively?
4. Were there any facts left out that should have been included in the story?

Scores were combined to create a treatment index representing the overall tone and handling of the stories.

Media relations was operationalized using responses from company officials and reporters. Using seven-point scales, respondents were asked to answer the seven questions below and to estimate how their counterpart in the relationship would respond:

1. In your opinion, was a legitimate effort made to meet the informational needs of reporters?
2. Were knowledgeable sources inside the company accessible to the news media?
3. Did the company attempt to shape or "color' the facts of the story?
4. Were company officials candid and honest with reporters?
5. Was the information supplied by the company an attempt to promote its image or products?
6. Did the company provide all the information it had to the media about this story?
7. Were company officials helpful and cooperative to the media?

Reporters were asked one additional question about the company's reputation:

8. Is this company a reliable and trustworthy source of news?

NEVER ALWAYS

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Responses were used to create seven indices representing seven independent variables measuring media relations. Two variables --reporters' ratings of media relations and company officials' ratings of media relations--were created by summing scores from all questions. Five independent variables were created to represent the coorientational measurements of the quality of the relationship: understanding, reporters' congruency, company officials' congruency, reporters' accuracy and company officials' accuracy. Scores for coorientational variables were obtained by determining the differences between responses.

For example, if a reporter's response was 4, and his estimate of the company official's score was 7; and if a company official's scores for the same items were 6 and 2 respectively, then the resultant values for this item would be as follows:

understanding	2	(6-4 = 2)
reporters' congruency . . .	3	(7-4 = 3)
company officials' congruency	4	(6-2 = 4)
reporters' accuracy	1	(7-6 = 1)
company officials' accuracy	2	(4-2 = 2)

The greater the difference, the more unfavorable in terms of evaluating the relationship. Scores were combined to create summative indices for each of the five coorientational concepts.

Applying Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software, the seven independent variables were tested for their association with the two dependent variables using two statistical tests.[13] Fourteen working hypotheses were first tested using raw scores, and correlation coefficients were computed for each. For the second test, independent variable scores were collasped into low, medium and high categories, and a priori analysis of variance contrasts were performed.

By using both tests, nonlinear relationships were more likely to be identified should they be masked by the correlation coefficients. The acceptable significance level was set at $p \leq .05$.

Findings

Of the seven variables measuring media relations, six were found to be significantly related to at least one aspect of news content. Eight of the fourteen hypotheses were accepted based on the combination of two statistical tests.

Number of errors was found to be significantly related to five independent variables: reporters' ratings of media relations, company officials' ratings of media relations, understanding, company officials' congruency and reporters' accuracy (59.5 percent of the stories were without errors, see table 1).

Treatment was found to be significantly related to three

TABLE 1

ERRORS REPORTED

ERROR	(n = 79) FREQUENCY	PERCENT OF STORIES WITH ERROR
Figures	15	13.9
Wrong emphasis of details	13	11.4
Misleading headlines	12	13.9
Errors in meaning	11	12.7
Other errors	9	11.4
Names wrong	7	7.6
Misquotations	7	8.9
Dates wrong	0	0

TABLE 2

CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS

	Number of errors	Treatment
Reporters' ratings of media relations	-.289 (p=.022)	.221 (p=.064)
Company officials' ratings of media relations	-.213 (p=.03)	.335 (p=.001)
Understanding	.276 (p=.026)	-.059 (p=.341)
Reporters' congruency	.244 (p=.046)	-.226 (p=.06)
Company officials' congruency	.215 (p=.030)	-.062 (p=.299)
Reporters' accuracy	.233 (p=.052)	-.232 (p=.053)
Company officials' accuracy	.032 (p=.413)	.149 (p=.153)

Directions of relationships are consistent with working hypotheses except for company officials' accuracy with treatment.

TABLE 3

A PRIORI CONTRASTS

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: Number of errors

CONTRAST	ARRANGEMENT
1	low with medium
2	medium with high
3	low with high
4	low with medium and high
5	low and medium with high

	CONTRASTS (T VALUES)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Reporters' ratings of media relations	.007 (p=.995) DF=46.0	1.988 (p=.053) DF=46.0	2.06 (p=.045) DF=46.0	1.18 (p=.244) DF=46.0	2.349 (p=.023) DF=46.0
Company officials' ratings of media relations	.839 (p=.404) DF=75.0	.938 (p=.351) DF=75.0	1.918 (p=.059) DF=75.0	1.556 (p=.124) DF=75.0	1.681 (p=.097) DF=75.0
Understanding	-2.623 (p=.019) DF=14.7	.352 (p=.729) DF=20.4	-1.678 (p=.121) DF=10.8	-2.886 (p=.008) DF=24.5	-.583 (p=.57) DF=13.4
Reporters' congruency	-.642 (p=.524) DF=46.0	-1.329 (p=.191) DF=46.0	-1.163 (p=.251) DF=46.0	.922 (p=361) DF=46.0	-1.465 (p=.15) DF=46.0
Company officials' congruency *	.795 (p=.433) DF=28.8	-2.875 (p=.006) DF=40.5	-1.537 (p=.131) DF=47.6	-.551 (p=.585) DF=32.5	-2.341 (p=.024) DF=46.5

Table continued on next page

TABLE 3

(continued)

eporters' ccuracy*	-2.221 (p=.036) DF=23.3	.075 (p=.942) DF=14.3	-1.602 (p=.144) DF=9.1	-2.435 (p=.022) DF=25.0	-.75 (p=.472) DF=0.4
ompany officials' ccuracy	-.342 (p=.734) DF=46.0	.087 (p=.931) DF=46.0	-.177 (p=.86) DF=46.0	-.308 (p=.759) DF=46.0	-.044 (p=.965) DF=46.0

* Asterick denotes the use of separate variance estimate. If the probability for F is greater than .05, pooled-variance estimate is used. If the probability is less than or equal to .05, separate variance is used. [14]

TABLE 4

A PRIORI CONTRASTS

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: Treatment

CONTRAST	ARRANGEMENT
1	low with medium
2	medium with high
3	low with high
4	low with medium and high
5	low and medium with high

	CONTRASTS (T VALUES)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Reporters' ratings of media relations	.236 (p=.815) DF=46.0	-1.591 (p=.118) DF=46.0	-1.4 (p=.168) DF=46.0	-.66 (p=.512) DF=46.0	-1.738 (p=.089) DF=46.0
Company officials' ratings of media relations	-1.039 (p=.302) DF=74.0	-1.078 (p=.285) DF=74.0	-2.318 (p=.023) DF=74.0	-1.894 (p=.062) DF=74.0	-1.997 (p=.05) DF=74.0
Understanding	1.988 (p=.053) DF=47.0	-1.75 (p=.078) DF=47.0	-.114 (p=.909) DF=47.0	1.096 (p=.279) DF=47.0	-1.083 (p=.284) DF=47.0
Reporters' congruency*	2.687 (p=.000) DF=25.2	2.239 (p=.031) DF=40.9	5.819 (p=.000) DF=13.5	6.196 (p=.001) DF=6.3	4.245 (p=.000) DF=27.3
Company officials' congruency*	-.557 (p=.581) DF=44.0	3.053 (p=.004) DF=48.6	2.635 (p=.011) DF=47.3	1.476 (p=.145) DF=54.5	3.091 (p=.004) DF=41.8

Table continued on next page

TABLE 4

(continued)

Reporters' accuracy*	2.73 (p=.011) DF=27.3	-.185 (p=.855) DF=18.5	2.635 (p=.03) DF=12.9	3.217 (p=.003) DF=40.8	1.133 (p=.279) DF=12.0
Company officials' accuracy	.186 (p=.853) DF=46.0	-1.259 (p=.214) DF=46.0	-1.195 (p=.238) DF=46.0	-.722 (p=474) DF=46.0	-1.327 (p=.191) DF=46.0

* Asterick denotes the use of separate variance estimate. If the probability for F is greater than .05, pooled-variance estimate is used. If the probability is less than or equal to .05, separate variance is used. 15

independent variables: company officials' ratings of media relations, reporters' congruency and reporters' accuracy.

None of the statistical tests indicated a significant relationship between treatment and reporters' ratings of media relations. However, four of the eight questions comprising the reporters' media relations index were found to have a significant relationship with treatment using correlation coefficients: (2) company sources accessible?, $r = .302$, $p = .049$; (4) company candid and honest?, $r = .302$, $p = .013$; (5) company attempt to promote image?, $r = .237$, $p = .041$; (6) company provide all information?, $r = .419$, $p = .001$. Although the hypothesis cannot be accepted, the data suggest that there may be individual factors involved that are related to treatment.

Three of the hypotheses accepted produced a significance level for correlation coefficients of slightly more than the stated requirement of $p \leq .05$: reporters' congruency with treatment, $p = .06$; reporters' accuracy with number of errors, $p = .052$; and reporters' accuracy with treatment, $p = .053$ (see table 2). However, a priori contrasts showed these relationships may be less linear than the others while still being significant (see table 3 and table 4).

In the first case, reporters' congruency with treatment, all five contrasts were significant. For reporters' accuracy with number of errors, two of the contrasts were significant. For reporters' accuracy with treatment, three contrasts were significant. Considering the near significant correlation coefficients in combination with the

contrasts, these hypotheses were judged acceptable. These three cases demonstrate the value of applying more than one statistical test to data when the linearity of relationships is unknown.

Discussion

This study grew out of the question: does media relations affect business news content? Results of this study answer the question in the affirmative and help confirm long-standing assumptions held by practitioners.

Just as importantly, results of the coorientational measurements suggest that in addition to the performance of the company officials, news content may be affected by underlying factors of the relationship.

This finding is important because although the number of factors affecting news content is probably infinite, the quality of the relationship as defined by coorientational measures is within the sphere of public relations influence.

Simply following generally accepted public relations strategy leads one to identify problems (i.e., lack of understanding, congruency or accuracy) and to plan and implement a program designed to reduce the ill effects produced by them.

The ability to pinpoint intangible factors affecting a relationship is still being perfected in studies such as the present one. But the very nature of media relations demands we come to terms with such ambiguities. The results obtained here strongly suggest that the

perceptions of reporters and company officials concerning the source, message and the behavior of the source may be related to the ultimate content of news stories.

Consequently, effective media relations must be viewed as an investment for the corporate public relations department aimed at more effectively communicating with the public through the mass media.

The idea of media relations as an investment is a crucial one. More than merely a case of following guidelines, media relations requires purposful actions from company officials to more consistently obtain the goal of adequate coverage. Accuracy and fairness in the press cannot be viewed as the result of the reporter's work alone. Corporate officials must work for good coverage by developing their media relations skills and by striving to reconcile differing values and perceptions between themselves and reporters. Ultimately, news content is the product of the company officials' efforts as well as the product of reporters' news-collecting and reporting activities. Corporations dissatisfied with their media coverage should look inward before casting accusations toward reporters.

Footnotes

[1]Scott M. Cutlip and Allen H. Center, Effective Public Relations, revised fifth edition, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1982), p. 384.

[2]H. Frazier Moore and Bertrand R. Canfield, Public Relations Principles, Cases, and Problems, seventh edition, (Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, 1977), p. 114.

[3]Otto Lerbinger, Big Business and the Mass Media, (New York: Lexington Books, 1977), pp. 86-89.

[4]David M. White, "The Gatekeeper: A Case Study in the Selection of News," Journalism Quarterly 27 (1950): p. 383.

[5]Everett M. Rogers and Dilip K. Bhomik, "Homophily-Heterophily: Relational Concepts for Communication Research," Public Opinion Quarterly 34 (1971): p. 522, 526.

[6]Ibid., p. 527.

[7]James L. Hoyt, "Source-Message Orientation in Interpersonal and Media Influences," Journalism Quarterly 53 (Spring 1976): pp. 472.

[8]Glen M. Broom, "Coorientational Measurement of Corporate-Public Understanding," paper presented at the National Conference on Measuring the Effectiveness of Public Relations, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, October 4, 1977, p. 1.

[9]Enno Hobbing, "Business Must Explain Itself," Business and Society Review (Autumn 1972): p. 85.

[10]Mitchell V. Charnley, "Preliminary Notes on a Study of Newspaper Accuracy," Journalism Quarterly 13 (Winter 1936): p. 394.

[11]Charles H. Brown, "Majority of Readers Give an A For Accuracy," Editor and Publisher (13 February 1965): pp. 13, 63.

[12]Fred C. Berry, Jr., "A Study of Accuracy in Local News Stories of Three Dailies," Journalism Quarterly 44 (Summer 1967): pp. 482, 485.

[13]Norman H. Nie, C. Hadlai Hull, Jean G. Jenkins, Darin Steinbrenner and Dale H. Bent, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975)

[14]Ibid., p. 270.

[15]Ibid., p. 270.